

## LOCAL NEWS

### *Helen Walton receives Liberty Bell Award*

# Supreme Court justice delivers Law Day address

by Holly Nelson

OSCODA — Supreme Court Justice Marilyn Kelly and veteran mediator Helen Walton were the guests of honor for the 23rd Judicial Circuit Bar Association's Law Day luncheon held Friday in Oscoda.

Kelly was the keynote speaker, and Walton the surprise recipient of the prestigious Liberty Bell Award.

Bar Association President Nichol Palumbo said the award is annually given to a non-attorney and outstanding citizen who has contributed to the legal community and who's efforts strengthen the system of justice.

The criteria for the award could have been written for Helen Walton, of East Tawas, according to Palumbo.

The award recognizes the more than 15 years during which Walton, has served as a family court mediator.

When Walton was first appointed by retired Circuit Judge J. Richard Ernst, it was to a paid position, according to Palumbo.

Funding for the service did not last long, but Walton continued to serve as an unpaid volunteer, working out of her home, and meeting the parties in any available space she could find in the court house.

Through her efforts, hundreds of cases have been resolved to the

benefit of the court docket, county budget, and to the families involved, according to 23rd Circuit Friend of the Court Char Baker.

When Family Judge John Hamilton orders mediation in child custody and parenting cases, Walton meets with the parties, listens to their concerns, helps resolve the issues, and writes up an agreement, Baker said.

Walton, who holds a Master's Degree in Social Work and is a state-certified mediator, does this at no cost to the parties or court. She never even seeks reimbursement for her expenses, Baker said.

"She's given a lot to the court and the families over the years," Baker said. "Domestic relations cases are not easy, but she is a good listener and has a calming effect on people. She has been very successful. She is very good at it."

Mediation — alternative dispute resolution — is recognized, and is now being emphasized as a means of saving court time and resources, Palumbo said. "In fact, it is the direction the judicial system is now moving."

Present to see Walton receive the award was her son, Bay City attorney Alan Walton.

"It was a surprise," the Liberty Bell recipient said. "I really did not anticipate it."

After the presentation, Justice Kelly spoke with Walton at length,

asking several questions about her work in helping families to resolve disputes outside of the courtroom.

"This is truly above and beyond the call of duty," Kelly said after learning of the amount of time and effort which Walton devotes to the mediation program.

Justice Kelly spoke on this year's Law Day theme: jury service.

After stressing the importance of a jury to the American system of justice, the former trial attorney, addressed a variety of other issues of importance to attorneys, including the "rocket docket," which is the name given to a slate of changes made by the Supreme Court and Michigan Court of Appeals to move cases along more quickly, Kelly said.

She also touched on grandparents rights, visitation, and an Alcona County riparian rights case now before the high court.

Kelly said the Supreme Court justices recognize the local, state and national significance of the Glass v Goeckel case, and are carefully considering the issues presented to them.

She said the high court's decision will be issued prior to July 31.

According to Palumbo, the bar association and Iosco County have law school graduate Brian Harger, of Glennie, to thank for bringing Justice Kelly to the area.

Harger is interning at the Alcona



Photo by Holly Nelson

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Marilyn Kelly (left) and 23rd Judicial Bar Association President Nichol Palumbo (right) congratulate the winner of the 2005 Liberty Bell Award, Helen Walton, of East Tawas, following the Law Day luncheon held Friday in Oscoda.

County Prosecutor's Office while he studies for his bar examination.

When Palumbo sought his help in finding a keynote speaker for the Law Day luncheon, Harger sent a letter to Justice Kelly.

"Having her here was quite an honor," Palumbo said.

Kelly, from Southfield, has served on the Michigan Supreme Court since 1997, elected after serv-

ing eight years on the Michigan Court of Appeals.

Before taking the bench, she spent 17 years as a trial lawyer, and five years as an elementary school teacher and an associate professor of French.

Kelly also served on the Michigan State Board of Education for 12 years, including two years as its president.